

Prosecutor Confident And Tough

By Ann Blackman
Associated Press

Richard Ben-Veniste rested his small, muscular frame on the courtroom lectern in front of the judge and nonchalantly propped an unpolished leather boot on the bottom shelf. He looked confident to the point of arrogance.

The 30-year-old assistant special Watergate prosecutor offered a brief "good morning" to the witness, Special White House Counsel J. Fred Buzhardt. Then he launched into the business of the day, grilling Buzhardt in search of holes in the mysterious White House tapes story.

Although tough in the courtroom, Ben-Veniste has been seen joking with witnesses and their lawyers during the recesses. One lawyer watched grimly as Ben-Veniste grilled his client for more than four hours. At the end of the day, he was overheard saying, "That Ben-Veniste, he's good." A White House lawyer agreed.

At times, Ben-Veniste appears a little embarrassed by all the attention. "I hope not to take it all too seriously," he said in an interview in his small office a few blocks from the White House. "You have to keep your sense of humor."

Moments later, he bragged: "I was fairly well known in New York. It probably seems funny because I'm young." But in Washington, he said, "It's a different kind of fame. You become well known for circumstances rather than something intrinsic."

Critics blast Ben-Veniste for his self-confident, often cocky, manner. But few doubt that he takes his job very seriously.

Asked, however, about his own interests, Ben-Veniste said, "Just say I have brown eyes and sleep in the nude."

Ben-Veniste, known to his friends as "Rick," wears blue pinstripe suits and glen-plaids in the courtroom, blue denims at home. He said that since he joined the special prosecutor's staff last July he has enjoyed his job.

"I believe I'm performing a valuable service to the country. I believe I have something to contribute to the effort," he said.

For the last five years, Ben-Veniste worked as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York. He prosecuted some celebrated cases, including that of Martin Sweig, the veteran administrative assistant of former House Speaker John W. McCormack.

On appeal, he argued—and won—that case against Samuel Dash, now counsel of the Senate Watergate Committee.

But the Watergate case, Ben-Veniste said, is harder than the others.

"... In a case like this, you have to apply a tremendous amount of concentration," he said.

The result is that Ben-Veniste thinks about the case most of the time, he said—while shaving, pedaling his 10-speed bike to work, and even with the dates he insists he fits into a busy schedule.

The curly-haired bachelor lives in a Georgetown apartment decorated with lots of green plants, a stereo set and books. One might guess that he misses New York: He's learned to make chocolate egg creams, a well-known New York soft drink, in his blender; and, when he criticizes New York for its "dirty, crowded streets," he doesn't sound as though that bothers him much.

Ben-Veniste says he had a conventional middle-class Jewish upbringing in the New York borough of Queens. His father, Irving, who now lives in Great Neck, L.I., is a fabric importer in the garment district.

A graduate of New York's Stuyvesant High School where he was captain of the track team, Ben-Veniste got a law degree from Columbia University.

The young prosecutor already has a reputation as a tough cross-examiner. But, after special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox was fired last month, he taped a sign to his office door:

"No More Mr. Nice Guy."